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Reagan rarin' to face the nation

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan, trying to rebuild his stalled presidency, Monday set a date for his post-Tower Commission appeal to the USA.

"It's full-speed ahead," Reagan told his Cabinet, seeking "a rebuilding process."

Chief of Staff Howard Baker, in his debut before the press, said "I've never seen him better than he was today."

Comparing his first-day impressions with his Capitol Hill dealings with Reagan, former Sen. Baker said: "I've never seen Ronald Reagan ... more fully in command."

Reagan ducked questions Monday, saying he'll answer them in a 9 p.m. EST Oval Office speech Wednesday carried live on all four networks.

Reagan and Baker Monday reviewed a draft of the speech.

"I think it's a marvelous speech and I think it will have a profound effect," said Baker.

But White House efforts to get the momentum going were foiled when a replacement for Reagan's nominee to head the CIA — Robert Gates — could not be found in time for the evening TV news.

The Washington Post reports today that ex-Sen. John Tower, commission chairman, refused the CIA post.

Bobby Ray Inman, former deputy director, said: "I have not been offered the nomination, and if offered it, I would not accept," adding he's "greatly distressed" by how Gates' nomination was handled.

Reagan said Gates "would easily have been confirmed" but for the Iran controversy.

But Gates' nomination ran into trouble because of his role in the arms deal. He'd told the Senate Intelligence Committee he ignored suspicions about the CIA's involvement, and that he'd helped Casey prepare for Casey's testimony by conferring with Lt. Col. Oliver North.

Also Monday:

■ Special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh asked a federal court to dismiss North's lawsuit seeking to halt his inquiry.

He said as long as North's suit is pending, "it invites potential witnesses to withhold."

■ A CBS-New York Times poll shows Reagan's approval rating, at 42 percent, down 25 points since the scandal broke.